

THAN BAHIL, AN ANCIENT CENTRE FOR SANSKRIT STUDY

Nepal is known for her admiration of Sanskrit language from time immemorial. The inscriptions¹ show that Sanskrit was not only the language of the educated but it also served as the official language during the Licchavi period. Its importance has remained always high for the learned people even at the subsequent periods of the Mallas and the Shah rulers. Among the Mallas, King Pratap Malla is famous for his wide knowledge of various languages and particularly of Sanskrit. His poems² in Sanskrit made him known as *Kavindra*. Learned scholars always recieved the patronage under the Malla kings. Similar is the case with Shah kings as well. In this connection, the name of Crown Prince Pratap Singha Shah comes to the fore front, under whose Chairmanship, the first Sanskrit Conference, in the International level, participated by the then well-known Sanskrit scholars from twelve different countries, was held at Balaju in Nepal in the 18th Century A.D. The participants numbering about seventy had come from such a distant places like Kashmir and Madras. This Conference was coordinated by Mahakavi Laxmana³.

Similarly, King Girvanyuddha Bir Vikrama Shah deserved special mention for establishing the first Sanskrit Library in the 19th Century

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1. Instances can be found out in the inscriptions scattered in different parts of the country. These inscriptions are published in:

a) *Nepalese Inscritptions in Gupta Charecters*, by RANIERO GNOLI, Part I & II, Pub. by I.S.M.E..O., Rome, 1956.

b) *Lichhvi kālaka abhilekha*, by DHANAVAJRA VAJRĀCHARYA, Pub. by Tribhuvana University, Nepal, 2030 Vikrama Samvata.

c) *Nepālako prācīna abhilekha*, ed. by Hari Rām Joshi, Pub. by Royal Nepal Academy, Nepāl, 2030 Vikrama Samvata.

2. D. WRIGHT, *History of Nepal*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1877, p. 213.

3. MAHĀKAVI LAXMANA (ed.), *Kavitānikaṣopalah* (in Sanskrit), Yogapracārīṇi Goraksha tillā, Kāshi, 1878, Sakya Samvata.

A.D. under the name Pustak Khana, now incorporated as the National Archives, Nepal, to facilitate the learned people to study the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit has succeeded to preserve its importance as against the onslaught of the English Education.

The impact of Sanskrit language can be seen in our day to day life as well through its effect in the names of the persons, castes, cities, Squares, Viharas etc. The names of the persons are usually Sanskrit words from the kings down to the common people. For example:

- 1) Sarada Prasad
- 2) Gaja Ratna
- 3) Hiranya Nath etc.

Similarly the names of the castes are also found in Sanskrit words.

Example:

- 1) Khadgi - Kasain
- 2) Visvokarma - Kami
- 3) Ranjitkar - Chhipa
- 4) Maharjan - Jyapu

As for the cities also, Kathmandu is known as Kasthamandapa; Patan as Lalitpur; Bhadgaon as Bhaktapur etc.

To add to this list are Sanskrit names of the squares and Viharas.

Square

Ashokamandapa for Ason Tole

Viharas

- 1) Gunakaramahavihara for Chhusya Bahal
- 2) Henakaramahavihara for Dhoka Bahal
- 3) Hiranyavarnamahavihara for Kwabhu Bahal etc.

The importance of Sanskrit language among the learned people in the ancient Nepal is reflected in the existence of several learning centres in Nepal, among others are the Viharas and Mathas. Here the attempt is made to concentrate only in Vihara and its contribution in the development of the Sanskrit language in the ancient times.

The word Vihara is constituted of two Sanskrit words, *viharati*+*iti* meaning there by a peaceful place for resting purposes and it is a Sanskrit word in itself. The Vihara functioned as a peaceful place before the emergence of the Enlightened Buddha. According to the famous Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsiang of the seventh century King Siddhodana, and Queen Maya Devi the parents of Siddhartha Gautama had their own personal viharas with their statues at Kapilavastu⁴. But it was Siddhartha the Enlightened Gautama Buddha who turned the Vihara into a preaching centre from a mere resting place. Thus he gave the prominent status of the prominence to the Vihara. Later on these Viharas became a learning centre for Sanskrit studies and evidences show that in the

4. SHAMAN HWUI LI & SAMUEL BEAL, *The life of Hiuen Tsiang*, Academica Asia-tica, India, 1973, pp 94-95.

thirteenth century, Dharma Shri Mitra⁵, Dharmaswami⁶ visited Nepal for their advanced learning in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit language which was solely used in all official documents during the Licchavi period has thrived and developed in this Vihara. Thus these Viharas seemed to have played an instrumental role in the development and fostering of the Sanskrit studies in Nepal.

Among such Viharas is Than Bahil or Vikramasil Mahavihara situated north of Kathmandu- a little behind the Amrit Campus at Lainchour. Though the time of its establishment has remained in obscure, the existing evidences show its presence in the 13th century. The famous Indian scholar Dharmashri Mitra from Vikramasila Vihara, Varanasi⁷ came here for the advanced study of Sanskrit language in order to understand a Buddhist epics which is written in Sanskrit⁸. The similarities between the names of the two places might indicate that the name of the Vihara has been put after the name of the Indian Vihara, where he has come from. His arrival to this place for the higher study in Sanskrit is an ample evidence of the higher understanding of Sanskrit language in Nepal. Another evidence that supports its existence in the thirteenth century is a manuscript named *Prajnaparamita*⁹. The writing of this manuscript was started by Manjushri and completed by Jinashri Jñāna. This book is dated Nepala Samvatta 344 Margasira Pratipada (1223 A.D.). This shows that Manjushri had visited here in the thirteenth century. Further, another scholar associated with this Vihara was a Tibetan scholar Dharma Swami by name, happened to visit this vihara for the study in the same thirteenth century. Thus the stay of these eminent scholars in this Vihara, showed that this Vihara had been one of the prominent learning centres of Sanskrit study in those days. Even to day visitors from Tibet and the Buddhist priests from different Vihara are continuing to come to this place for seeing and studying *Prajñāpāramita*. The Vihara had to provide fooding and lodging to any priests coming from outside for study. At present cash award is made in place of free fooding. This shows the incentives for higher learning given to the scholars.

Then the word old vihara is clear proof of its first rate importance among the viharas of Kathmandu and certainly it was an abode of higher learning. The literal meaning of Than Bahi is the old vihara. Than means elder or most appropriately Older and Bahi means vihara.

5. SHASTRI HARAPRASAD (ed.), *The Vrihat svayambhu puranam, Sasthodyaya*, pp. 315-369.

6. *Kathmandu Valley*, Prepared by His Majesty's Government of Nepal in collaboration with the United Nations and UNESCO, Anton Schroll & Co., Vienna, 1975, p. 13.

7. MAHĀPANDIT ABHAYĀKARGUPTA, *Niṣpannayogāvali*, ed. by Bhattacharya Binayatosh, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1949, p. 10.

8. *Nāmasangīti*.

9. It is the greatest philosophical work on the Buddhism containing of 18,000 *ślokas*.

This vihara is square in shape with chaityas made of stone and other Buddhist images of Licchavi period. One inscription dated Nepala Sambata 802 Chaitra Sukla Panchami (1781 A.D.) mentioned the brick paving of this vihara by Hari Singha during the reign of King Parthipendra Malla¹⁰. The principal image of this vihara is said to be that of Devavatara and it is moulded by metal plate. The house sheltering the image is in the shape of a temple with triple roofed and others around the vihara are two storeyed and the ground floor is used for the study purpose till now. Other storeys of this house is meant for sheltering the scholars coming for the study from outside. This can be see in the designing of the rooms alignment pattern in the first floor. Thus, this vihara situated at the peaceful environment with the academic atmosphere, has been providing a congenial atmosphere for learning in the past and continue to remain so in year to come.

10. National Archives, Stone Inscription No. 173: Also See: RAJIVAMSA SANKER MAN, *Kāntipura Silālekha suchi*, H.M.G. of Nepal, 2027 V. S., p. 125.